a competing plan that would somehow accommodate the possibility of Soviet backsliding.

As Powell and Wolfowitz worked out their strategies, Congress was losing patience. New calls went up for large cuts in defense spending in light of the new global environment. The harshest critique of Pentagon planning came from a usually dependable ally of the military establishment, Georgia Democrat Sam Nunn, chairman of the Senate Armed Services committee. Nunn told fellow senators in March 1990 that there was a ''threat blank'' in the administration's proposed $295 billion defense budget and that the Pentagon's ''basic assessment of the overall threat to our national security'' was ''rooted in the past.'' The world had changed and yet the ''development of a new military strategy that responds to the changes in the threat has not yet occurred.'' Without that response, no dollars would be forthcoming.

Nunn's message was clear. Powell and Wolfowitz began filling in the blanks. Powell started promoting a Zen-like new rationale for his Base Force approach. With the Soviets rapidly becoming irrelevant, Powell argued, the United States could no longer assess its military needs on the basis of known threats. Instead, the Pentagon should focus on maintaining the ability to address a wide variety of new and unknown challenges. This shift from a ''threat based'' assessment of military requirements to a ''capability based'' assessment would become a key theme of the Plan. The United States would move from countering Soviet attempts at dominance to ensuring its own dominance. Again, this project would not be cheap.

Powell's argument, circular though it may have been, proved sufficient to hold off Congress. Winning support among his own colleagues, however, proved more difficult. Cheney remained deeply skeptical about the Soviets, and Wolfowitz was only slowly coming around. To account for future uncertainties, Wolfowitz recommended drawing down U.S. forces to roughly the levels proposed by Powell, but doing so at a much slower pace; seven years as opposed to the four Powell suggested. He also built in a ''crisis response/reconstitution'' clause that would allow for reversing the process if events in the Soviet Union, or elsewhere, turned ugly.

With these now elements in place, Cheney saw something that might work. By combining Powell's concepts with those of Wolfowitz, he could counter congressional criticism that his proposed defense budget was out of line with the new strategic reality, while leaving the door open for future force increases. In late June, Wolfowitz, Powell, and Cheney presented their plan to the president, and within as few weeks Bush was unveiling the new strategy.

Bush laid out the rationale for the Plan in a speech in Aspen, Colorado, on August 2, 1990. He explained that since the danger of global war had substantially receded, the principal threats to American security would emerge in unexpected quarters. To counter those threats, he said, the United States would increasingly base the size and structure of its forces on the need to respond to ''regional contingencies'' and maintain a peacetime military presence overseas. Meeting that need would require maintaining the capability to quickly deliver American forces to any ''corner of the globe,'' and that would mean retaining many major weapons systems then under attack in Congress as overly costly and unnecessary, including the ''Star Wars'' missile-defense program. Despite those massive outlays, Bush insisted that the proposed restructuring would allow the United States to draw down its active forces by 25 percent in the years ahead, the same figure Powell had projected ten months earlier.

The Plan's debut was well timed. By a remarkable coincidence, Bush revealed it the very day Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait.

The Gulf War temporarily reduced the pressure to cut military spending. It also diverted attention from some of the Plan's less appealing aspects. In addition, it inspired what would become one of the Plan's key features: the use of ''overwhelming force'' to quickly defeat enemies, a concept since dubbed the Powell Doctrine.

Once the Iraqi threat was ''contained,'' Wolfowitz returned to his obsession with the Soviets, planning various scenarios involved possible Soviet intervention in regional conflicts. The failure of the hard-liner coup against Gorbachev in August 1991, however, made it apparent that such planning might be unnecessary. Then, in late December, just as the Pentagon was preparing to put the Plan in place, the Soviet Union collapsed.

With the Soviet Union gone, the United States had a choice. It could capitalize on the euphoria of the moment by nurturing cooperative relations and developing multilateral structures to help guide the global realignment then taking place; or it could consolidate its power and pursue a strategy of unilateralism and global dominance. It chose the latter course.

In early 1992, as Powell and Cheney campaigned to win congressional support for their augmented Base Force plan, a new logic entered into their appeals. The United States, Powell told members of the House Armed Services Committee, required ''sufficient power'' to ''deter any challenger from ever dreaming of challenging us on the world stage.'' To emphasize the point, he cast the United States in the role of street thug. ''I want to be the bully on the block,'' he said, implanting in the mind of potential opponents that ''there is no future in trying to challenge the armed forces of the United States.''

As Powell and Cheney were making this new argument in their congressional rounds, Wolfowitz was busy expanding the concept and working to have it incorporated into U.S. policy. During the early months of 1992, Wolfowitz supervised the preparation of an internal Pentagon policy statement used to guide military officials in the preparation of their forces, budgets, and strategies. The classified document, known as the Defense Planning Guidance, depicted a world dominated by the United States, which would maintain its superpower status through a combination of positive guidance and overwhelming military might. the image was one of a heavily armed City on a Hill.

The DPG stated that the ''first objective'' of U.S. defense strategy was ''to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival.'' Achieving this objective required that the United States ''prevent any hostile power from dominating a region'' of strategic significance. America's new mission would be to convince allies and enemies alike ''that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests.''

Another new theme was the use of preemptive military force. The options, the DPG noted, ranged from taking preemptive military action to head off a nuclear, chemical, or biological attack to ''punishing'' or ''threatening punishment of'' aggressors ''through a variety of means,'' including strikes against weapons-manufacturing facilities.

The DPG also envisioned maintaining a substantial U.S. nuclear arsenal while discouraging the development of nuclear programs in other countries. It depicted a ''U.S.-led system of collective security'' that implicitly precluded the need for rearmament of any king by countries such as Germany and Japan. And it called for the ''early introduction'' of a global missile-defense system that would presumably render all missile-launched weapons, including those of the United States, obsolete. (The United States would, of course, remain the world's dominant military power on the strength of its other weapons systems.)

The story, in short, was dominance by way of unilateral action and military superiority. While coalitions—such as the one formed during the Gulf War—held ''considerable promise for promoting collective action,'' the draft DPG stated, the United States should expect future alliances to be ''ad hoc assemblies, often not lasting beyond the crisis being confronted, and in many cases carrying only general agreement over the objectives to be accomplished.'' It was essential to create ''the sense that the world order is ultimately backed by the U.S.'' and essential that America position itself ''to act independently when collective action cannot be orchestrated'' or in crisis situation requiring immediate action. ''While the U.S. cannot become the world's policeman,'' the document said, ''we will retain the preeminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends.'' Among the interests the draft indicated the United States would defend in this manner were ''access to vital raw materials, primarily Persian Gulf oil, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, [and] threats to U.S. citizens from terrorism.''

The DPC was leaked to the New York Times in March 1992. Critics on both the left and the right attacked it immediately. Then-presidential candidate Pat Buchanan portrayed candidate a ''blank check'' to America's allies by suggesting the United States would ''go to war to defend their interests.'' Bill Clinton's deputy campaign manager, George Stephanopoulos, characterized it as an attempt by Pentagon officials to ''find an excuse for big defense budgets instead of downsizing.'' Delaware Senator Joseph Biden criticized the Plan's vision of a ''Pax Americana, a global security system where threats to stability are suppressed or destroyed by U.S. military power.'' Even those who found the document's stated goals commendable feared that its chauvinistic tone could alienate many allies. Cheney responded by attempting to distance himself from the Plan. The Pentagon's spokesman dismissed the leaked document as a ''low-level draft'' and claimed that Cheney had not seen it. Yet a fifteen-page section opened by proclaiming that it constituted ''definitive guidance from the Secretary of Defense.''

Powell took a more forthright approach to dealing with the flap: he publicly embraced the DPG's core concept. In a TV interview, he said he believed it was ''just fine'' that the United States reign as the world's dominant military power. ''I don't think we should apologize for that,'' he said. Despite bad reviews in the foreign press, Powell insisted that America's European allies were ''not afraid'' of U.S. military might because it was ''power that could be trusted'' and ''will not be misused.''

Mindful that the draft DPG's overt expression of U.S. dominance might not fly, Powell in the same interview also trotted out a new rationale for the original Base Force plan. He argued that in a post-Soviet world, filled with new dangers, the United States needed the ability to fight on more than one front at a time. ''One of the most destabilizing things we could do,'' he said, ''is to cut our forces so much that if we're tied up in one area of the world . . . and we are not seen to have the ability to influence another area of